

Inquiry and change

KATE TRINGHAM talks to staff at one of the schools that has been involved in the Literacy Professional Development Project.

It has been hard slog, and the level of commitment required nothing short of absolute. But for an intermediate school in Lower Hutt that has just completed two years on the Literacy Professional Development Project, there is no going back.

Hutt Intermediate School's teachers have rated the project as one of the most effective models for school professional development they have used to date.

"This is the most rewarding professional development I have ever done," says head literacy leader, Jocelyn Pollock.

"It has made a huge difference to our school that is very sustainable. And the challenge for us now is to keep the momentum going."

At the beginning of the project in March 2004, Hutt Intermediate decided its goal was to move all students two sub-levels on the aTTle assessment tool for writing.

Two years on, that goal has been achieved. But principal Neil Withington points out that the results are even more dramatic when taking into account that because of the initial preparatory work involved, the inclass professional development for the teachers didn't actually begin in earnest until almost half-way through that first year.

"But even when we did our assessments mid-way through term four we were starting to see some positive changes - after only two or three months work with teachers. And that was enough to spur us on."

Neil says that from the outset, the school agreed that the project would be its sole focus.

"I think that has been part of the secret. In the past, we have had a shotgun approach to professional development to some extent. You try to move forward on a number of different fronts and you can be successful to a degree, but we decided that this was so important that we would put aside most of the other professional development that we would have done in the past to put our total energy and focus into literacy, and I think that has had a huge benefit."

The school invested most of its resources into teacher release and has had only two after-school professional development staff meetings in two years. It also eliminated work on Saturdays and teacher-only days.

"Basically, all of our professional development takes place during the school day in small groups. You can't expect staff to give willingly if there is no give and take, and not having staff meetings, and being released from class to go and do professional development, lifted the stakes. It said that this project was so important that we are going to release you from class to do it, and I think that sent a strong message to staff."

Melanie Winthrop, who facilitated the programme at the school with Julie Beattie, agreed that the programme was challenging on many levels and required a huge commitment from staff.

"The hardest part is helping teachers understand that to improve their students' achievement, they need to be continually reflecting on their teaching. So it's really all about developing an inquiry habit of mind. There was tension at first, but when they started getting results back

and seeing the impact of what they had been doing - the data built up confidence in what were trying to achieve. The second challenge was to help teachers identify and examine the beliefs that actually drove their practice.

"From evidence, you can talk to teachers about their practice until the cows come home - you can go in and model lessons and discuss research. But ingrained beliefs about why things happen and why they do what they do are the real drivers of their decisions about teaching practice. Unless they have a chance to explore those beliefs, and evaluate them in light of evidence, then there is no sustained improvement," she says.

Jocelyn says the impact on teacher attitudes and student achievement has been significant.

"The whole point of the project was to raise student achievement by specifically looking at a group of the hardest to reach students in each class.

"The idea was that you modified and really looked at your teaching for those students and if it was working for those students and made a difference for them, then it was really working for everyone else. So they were kind of like a thermometer for your teaching and its effectiveness. And it has really worked. Across the whole school, our overall improvement of achievement was two sub-levels, but we are still aiming higher. We want to go further, and we think we can."

This year, as well as continuing to focus on the lowest achievers, the school will also focus on gifted and talented students. There will be two monitor groups in each class to achieve this.

Jocelyn believes the project has worked because it has made teachers aware they have a responsibility to make changes in their practices.

"It's the teachers becoming students of effective practice, and that has been a major change."

The building of content knowledge has been an important part of the project.

"We are still developing teacher understanding of what good writing is. For myself, I knew very little about grammar, and that has been a big learning curve for me and a lot of other teachers. There are aspects - almost like the mechanics of writing and the quality of writing - that we have had to look at in more detail. But it's important because it has been identified that, particularly for the higher achieving students, one of the challenges for teachers is to improve their content knowledge - to know what makes a good piece of writing themselves."

Jocelyn's classroom practice has changed in other ways as a result of what she has learned through the project.

"My focus is no longer task based. It's literacy learning based. A couple of years ago, I would have said 'we're going to write a letter.' Now, I would say 'we are going to write a letter, but we are going to really focus on who the letter is for, and make sure the tone is appropriate for who we are writing for', or look at paragraphing and so on. So you are really making a detailed examination of the writing rather than the task."

Developing the appropriate writing behaviours in students has enabled them to take more responsibility for critiquing their own writing through a focus on key elements such as purpose, content, structure and language resources.

Many of the teachers have remarked that they have altered their teaching for other areas of the curriculum as a result of the changes. "It's not just about best practice in literacy. It's about best practice in teaching."

One way the school has managed to build up a strong team commitment has been to create a group of literacy leaders. There are now five other teachers at Hutt Intermediate who provide leadership to small groups.

"These small group conversations have meant the classroom teachers have had more accessibility to forms of leadership in literacy - and that has made a huge difference, because there is no way one person could sustain the professional development on their own in the school."

In the future, the school is looking at developing the role of those literacy leaders, and providing them with professional development in their role as leaders in the school to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the project.

"We have all realised that there will never be a point when everyone says 'I'm there'. You are always going to be learning as a teacher and I think that has been a big mind shift for us. The staff has realised that the professional development in literacy has not stopped just because the project has stopped. It's ongoing, but now we are doing it ourselves. It's a huge commitment - as a classroom teacher it's a lot of time out of class, but it's worthwhile time out of class."

Neil agrees that although the school has stepped out of the project, they have, in fact, only just started.

"We're into the third year now and having to stand on our own two feet. And we are - we had to build the sustainability into it last year. But now that we have a process of analysing what kids are doing, new issues are cropping up. We don't necessarily feel that we see the light at the end of the tunnel - it's just a long process of challenging teachers to reflect on what they are doing, and a continual path for growth."

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